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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001782

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK

P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY

USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER

NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR MOPS IS LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, UNSCOL SOMEWHAT OPTIMISTIC  
ON GHAJAR PROGRESS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams relayed to visiting NEA DAS David Hale that ultimately, the GOL was looking for a "clean withdrawal" by Israel from Ghajar with no future Israeli involvement of any kind. Williams reported that the Syrians seemed "serious" about negotiations with Israel. On Hezbollah, Williams relayed that Hezbollah officials were confident regarding their prospects in the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, and that their alliance with their Christian partner, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, remained firm, while their alliance with their Shia partner, Speaker Nabih Berri and his Amal Movement, was slightly less solid. Williams speculated that there may be an understanding between Hezbollah and majority leader Saad Hariri that he become the next PM, regardless of whether March 14 retained the parliamentary majority. End summary.

SINIORA IN BETTER SPIRITS  
REGARDING GHAJAR PROCESS

¶2. (C) Visiting DAS David Hale and the Ambassador, accompanied by Lebanon Desk Officer Matt Irwin and PolOff, met with UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams and UN PolOff Salvatore Pedulla at the UNSCOL headquarters on December 19. Williams reported that he had met PM Fouad Siniora earlier in the day, and that he found the PM in a good mood, despite Siniora's frustration with the Israeli "non-response" to UNIFIL's Ghajar proposal. Williams said that Siniora seems to have reconciled himself with the notion that withdrawal from Ghajar was "a process."

¶3. (C) Hale relayed his recent visit to Israel, noting Israeli readiness to reach an agreement on Ghajar. After laying out points the Israelis were interested in pursuing with respect to an agreement (one, acknowledgment by the international community of Israeli withdrawal; two, agreement for future consultations with the Israelis when UNIFIL's deployment changed, and; three, a political arrangement signed by Israel and Lebanon regarding Israeli withdrawal), Williams suggested that the U.S. inform Siniora about the perceived Israeli receptivity.

¶4. (C) Williams, noting that he would travel to Israel December 22-23, assessed that the Lebanese would likely agree to international acknowledgment and some sort of political arrangement (but not a "formal agreement"), but that it would be difficult to secure agreement on Israel's request for future consultations once UNIFIL decided to pull back. Williams stressed that the GOL wants a "clean withdrawal" and "no further Israeli involvement."

SYRIANS KEEN ON  
SYRIAN-ISRAELI TRACK

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¶5. (C) Williams recounted that during his November 6 trip to Syria, Syrian FM Walid Moallem seemed "serious" about negotiations with Israel, believing that only a few open items remained. If these issues were resolved, Williams said, the Syrians expressed their readiness to begin direct talks. Williams noted that Syrian VP Farouk al-Sharaa expressed a nervousness that Israeli PM Ehud Olmert would be unable to "deliver." According to Williams, both Syrian leaders were intensely interested in the U.S. presidential elections.

HIZBALLAH "AGITATED" BY  
ISRAELI OVERFLIGHTS

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¶6. (C) Having recently met with Hizballah officials, Williams relayed that Hizballah seems "reasonably content" these days. However, it remained "very agitated" by Israeli overflights.

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Williams quoted Hizballah officials as saying their patience was limited and they would be forced to take action if the overflights continued, a threat which Williams believed was merely a "bluff." Williams said he warned Hizballah against taking action because the consequences would be significant.

HIZBALLAH "CONFIDENT"  
GOING INTO ELECTIONS

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¶7. (C) Williams did not believe Hizballah would take any aggressive action against Israel prior to the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, adding that Hizballah was fairly confident regarding its anticipated electoral gains. Williams assessed that Hizballah's alliance seemed to be stronger with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun than with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. (Comment: We have also been hearing that Hizballah's relations with its Christian partner currently is better than with its Shia partner. End comment.)

SAAD HARIRI SECURING THE PM  
POSITION VIA HIZBALLAH?

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¶8. (C) When the Ambassador inquired as to Williams' assessment of why majority leader Saad Hariri continued to meet with Hizballah officials after his October meeting with Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah, Williams speculated that there is a tacit understanding on maintaining security between the Sunni and Shia, as well as an understanding on how the votes will be divided between the Sunni and Shia candidates. Williams also suggested that there could be an understanding that Hariri would become the next PM, regardless of whether March 14 remained the parliamentary majority. (Note: This tracks with what we have been hearing. End note.)

¶9. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.

SISON